

Ancestor Worship - Ancestors In Africa And Asia, Among The Inca, Ancestral Ambivalence, Bibliography

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Ancestor worship is the reverent devotion expressed by descendants for their deceased forebears through a culturally prescribed set of rituals and observances. The prominence of ancestors as a focus of worship within a broader religious tradition is common in many parts of the world, including Asia, Africa, and Native America, but there are few unifying characteristics cross-culturally. Commonalities include:

“ Only those deceased of appropriate relationship to the living and who have undergone the necessary *rites de passage* are worshiped. ” Those that are worshiped usually are recognized by name or title, often a special posthumous one. ” Services to the ancestors frequently include offerings and libations. ”

That ancestor worship is related to the animistic belief in a spirit or soul surviving the body after death, as proposed by early anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), is reasonable, since it is this spirit essence of the ancestor that is believed to continue its relationship with descendants. That ancestor worship is related to the earliest stage of religious expression among humans, however, as Tylor's theory further suggested, is certainly debatable. Other controversies in the study of ancestor worship include whether practices in honor of the deceased constitute actual worship; the extent to which linear versus collateral relatives comprise the worshiping group; the ways in which the living are influenced by the dead; and the individual, family, kin group, or regional variability in practice that can be present in a single cultural tradition.

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In his work among the Tallensi of Ghana, Meyer Fortes emphasizes the significance of ancestor worship to patrilineage unification and lineage or segment differentiation. In particular, the father–oldest surviving son relationship is emphasized, the latter having the primary responsibility for performing the appropriate rituals and service. In general, placement of an African ancestral shrine...

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In his early chronicle of Inca customs, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala pictures a mummy with feathered headdress and fine raiment carried on a litter as illustration of November or aya marcay quilla (Quechua for "the month of the dead"). He describes how during the holiday of the dead the deceased were removed from their crypts, adorned with clothing and feathers, given food—thro...

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Ancestor worship is most likely to be practiced in a society with strong lineages or other consanguineal corporate groups whose continuity, standing, and control of resources extends over generations, and one in which there are strong beliefs in an active spirit world. In such contexts the appropriately related and ritually defined deceased continue to be interactive lineage and family members, ca...

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